

CCER
Connecticut Council
for
EDUCATION REFORM

Testimony by Jeffrey Villar, Ph.D. to the Education Committee

February 25, 2015

Good afternoon, distinguished members of the Education Committee. My name is Jeffrey Villar, and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Council for Education Reform (CCER), a nonprofit that seeks to narrow Connecticut's achievement gap while raising academic outcomes for all students. I would like to share CCER's position on S.B. No. 942, *An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor Concerning Education*.

CCER was pleased that the Governor's proposed budget appears to prioritize early childhood education by continuing state funding for preschool access. We also encourage the legislature to invest even more in early childhood education, exploring new ways to make school readiness programs available to all low-income children. Investing early will save us money in the long run by setting students up for success.

We were also pleased to see that the proposed budget contains capital investments in Connecticut's Alliance Districts. However, we are very concerned that the Alliance Districts are being flat-funded through the Education Cost Sharing grant. In reality, as costs increase annually, failing to increase funding will amount to a cut to Connecticut's lowest-performing districts. They simply cannot afford this.

Additionally, there are some alarming elements of the proposed budget. For example, it decreases funding for extended time in some of our neediest districts—time that is used to help students who are behind get back on track. It also outlines a hiring freeze. Depending on how this concept is carried out, it may have a significant impact on the capacity of the next Commissioner of Education to appropriately staff the SDE. It is absolutely critical that the SDE build up the capacity to provide high-quality technical support to our neediest districts, and hold them accountable for results.

Although it is commendable that the Governor has refrained from balancing the budget on the back of the public education system at large, we certainly don't want to see the burden being borne primarily by the lowest-performing districts either. Accordingly, we trust that our legislators will ensure that the necessary steps are taken to improve this budget.

With respect to another bill, S.B. No. 944, CCER has always advocated for full-day Kindergarten across the state. It is a recommendation that was outlined in our original report in 2011. We hope that our legislators will explore ways to alleviate the potential local burden of these costs.

Finally, while not contemplated by either of these bills, CCER would also like to take this opportunity to underscore the need for Connecticut to prioritize measures that will elevate the teaching profession. The legislature should consider broadening the pool of excellent teachers in this state by improving their preparation within Connecticut and by finding ways to attract talent from outside of Connecticut. For this reason, CCER advocates for new incentives to attract and retain exceptional teachers in our lowest-performing schools; establishing certification reciprocity with other states; the sharing of performance data with teacher preparation programs so that they know when they need to improve; and increasing the number of hours that students who are studying to be teachers spend in actual classroom teaching assignments.